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December 29, 1962

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

I have recently had a letter from Trumbull Higgins, an historian who specializes in the area where military and political factors intersect in major decisions. He writes as follows:

"As a consequence of the domestic political repercussions of the more or less endemic Cuban crisis, I am taking the liberty of suggesting that consideration be given to the prompt preparation of a serious and official history of this problem. Whether such a history should be declassified, in whole or in part, in order to head off partisan political criticism is immaterial; its value to the officials concerned should be self-evident.

"Since my background, both with the Institute for Defense Analyses and in private scholarship (currently I am completing my fourth book on the problems of contemporary coalition warfare, namely Hitler's campaign in Russia, while teaching at Hunter College in New York City), might seem to qualify me particularly well for such a task, I am offering my services in such an endeavor. Perhaps the Institute would be the best semi-governmental organization to carry such a project through."

I know Higgins slightly; he is an old friend of Mary Meyer's, who knows him better. His previous books are Winston Churchill and the Second Front, 1940-1943 (Oxford University Press, 1957), and Korea and the Fall of MacArthur (Oxford University Press, 1960). Both are brilliant, trenchant, somewhat unconventional essays in

politico-military history. He is, I think, a careful and scrupulous historian, but also has considerable independence of mind. Anything he wrote would not be dull official history; but it would be penetrating and probably illuminating.

Higgins's proposal raises a general question: should we not make an effort to write up the crises of the Administration, if only for the files, before memories fade and everyone gets absorbed in something else? Obviously no one regularly employed around the White House has time for such historical labors. I wonder therefore whether it might not be a good idea to bring in qualified persons to write ad hoc accounts of major episodes. I wish, for example, we had done this in the weeks after the U. S. Steel controversy. If we do not begin a program of this sort, we run the risk of not having coherent accounts of the major events of these years -- and files, diaries and recollections are likely to be far less satisfactory sources for the future historian than an independent survey made soon after the event.

If we were to undertake such a program, there would still be the question whether we would want careful, factual chronicles or interpretative essays. I would think it best to strike for a combination -- that is, to commission people to collect and write up the facts but not to refrain from interpretation and generalization.

I am sending copies of this memorandum to Mac and Ted. I do think we ought to work out some way of establishing the historical record in a manner which would distract busy officials as little as possible from the problems of the present and the future.

Scotty Reston's column in the Post-Dispatch of December 28 is relevant.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

cc: Mr. Bundy
Mr. Sorensen

Ed

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 28, 1962

Kennedy Administration Makes An Unusual Amount of History But Keeps a Poor Record of It

Its Big Decisions Are Often Taken
In Small Private Meetings, Usually
Without the Benefit of Any Chrono-
logical Account of What Happened.

By JAMES RESTON

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 28.

EVERY AMERICAN ADMINISTRATION makes more history than it preserves, but the Kennedy Administration has made more history in 1962 and kept less than any other since the exciting

This is both a pity and a mystery. No administration since Roosevelt's and maybe even since Wilson's has been more conscious of history or more conscientious to write it, but the record is being poorly kept.

President Kennedy said the other day to Chancellor Adenauer of West Germany that we were possibly "at an important turning point in the history of the relations between East and West." Later, in his television review of his first two years in office, he referred to the confrontation of United States and Soviet power in Cuba and the conflict between Soviet and Chinese ideologies as "a climactic period."

Caryl P. Haskins, the reflective president of the Carnegie Foundation of Washington, has suggested that we may be living in one of the historic Golden Ages of history, comparable to the days of Periclean Athens or the early days of

night and jot down one of two little historic gems, but articulate as this White House staff is, it is not of the generation of diarists that went out with Henry L. Stimson.

The President himself is conscious of this problem, and is always promising to spend a quiet evening at home with a dictaphone, but until somebody invents the 48-hour day, this is not likely to happen. Therefore, the only hope is not to burden the President but to draft some trusted aid to serve as recorder.

Otherwise, even if the nation is ignored, what will the President himself do after Jan. 20, 1963? By that time several other things will have happened, some of them no doubt of historical interest, and he will be out of a job. Then he will be 51, too young for retirement and too old for touch football, but just right for writing history. Notes at that time will be useful, for Churchill demonstrated, the way to be sure of your

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been attained, at least at home. Yet the threat of violence and social disorganization can never have been so

great as that they faced in the 1960s. But the fact that the enormous challenge of the 1960s was up with the letter of the law and maybe even on the President's own less sweeping estimate the era is better than the official recording of its secrets.

The big decisions of this Administration are often taken in small private meetings, usually without the benefit of any chronological account of what happened. A record is kept of the Cabinet meetings but the Cabinet seldom meets. The National Security Council meets more often and again its recommendations are recorded, but it meets on the whim of the President and sometimes it is convened to discuss great decisions, sometimes it meets merely to be told what has happened in small unrecorded sessions, and sometimes it does not meet at all.

THIS CONFORMS to President Kennedy's style. He hates chatter around long tables. He learned over the preliminary analysis of the last Cuba crisis to avoid a group of Cabinet and sub-Cabinet officials who were chosen partly on the ground that they would keep secrets. He likes the human race in small doses, and is constantly summoning people to his office in ones or twos for talks that often lead directly to major decisions.

This, of course, is his privilege. It could be argued that, until Kennedy entered the White House, the American Government was slowly being choked to death by red tape emanating from endless talkative committees. Yet the nation has its rights too. It is entitled to the memories of its servants, for memory is the raw material of history and tradition.

1964 illustrates the point. Not only East-West relations, but allied relations, and federal-state relations, and federal-business relations all reached a point of crisis this year—usually in some private talk with Andrei Gromyko, or Gov. Ross Barnett, or Roger Blough in the White House. What did happen in the Blough-Kennedy meeting in the steel crisis? We do not know, and what is more important, no official record was kept. And what about Ross Barnett? For all we know, Robert Kennedy took Mississippi on the telephone.